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ABSTRACT

This study assessed student perceptions of service at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane (Australia). Data were based on open-ended discussions with 48 undergraduate focus groups during which participants were asked what they perceived to be the good and bad aspects of university life, what they did to cope with obstacles, and how they thought the university could improve services. The protocol contained 18 questions: 5 intended as ice-breakers; 3 eliciting comments about positive aspects; 7 asking how students dealt with obstacles encountered; 1 which tried to identify a unifying theme; and 3 final questions which asked students about their relationship with the university. Responses were organized into two "themes": the first, areas where students perceived university services to be positive, and the second services which the students perceived as needing improvement. Positive themes included access to professional assistance; easy access to recreation and day-to-day conveniences; educational support services; positive academic and staff attitude; school efforts to improve services; school location; and real-world identity and industry connections. Areas judged to need improvement included: a confusing administrative bureaucracy; fragmented sources of information; access to technology resources; campus parking and transportation; bookshop and meal expenses; campus aesthetics; and performance of the student council. (Contains 10 references.) (CH)

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Student Focus: Project Report of a Student-Centered Study of University Services at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

David A. Brenders, Peter Hope, and Abraham Ninnan
with the Student Focus Team

Abstract

This document is the official report of the methods and findings of the Student Focus Project, a six month study of undergraduate student perceptions of service at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. The project was dubbed Student Focus for two reasons. First, this study reverses the typical procedure of assessing perceptions of service by compiling student feedback on a list of university services, either as aggregated on a single questionnaire or as collected by individual services and then compiled. Rather, this project assesses students' gestalt perceptions of the university as a provider of service from the position of their own needs and experiences with the university. Second, this study uses a rigorous application of focus group methodology to capture the overall, systemwide dynamics of positive and negative experiences of service, including the students' contribution to the ongoing quality of service. As such, the study identifies problems and opportunities for university service that transcend the domain of discreet services and identifies service-related *folie a deux* where problems are magnified or sustained by the students' own coping strategies. Specially, the study paneled twenty four focus groups of undergraduate students to assess their beliefs about a pre-tested set of questions concerning positive and negative aspects of university life, successes and frustrations with university service, attempts to overcome the obstacles of university life, and what students expect from their relationship to the university. Of the themes identified in the Student Focus study, it was found that "Perceptions of Administrative Confusion" and the "Balkanisation of Information" figure larger in the minds of students than the "quality disappointments" associated with various discreet services.

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Executive Summary

The aim of the Student Focus project was to gather meaningful information about students' perceptions of the services they receive at QUT. The original project brief posed the question, 'What is the student experience of everything in the university other than teaching?'

Given this broad scope, the project brief further stipulated that the project: (a) 'take disparate information and turn it into useful feedback', and (b) 'not replicate previous service-specific data gathering, but capture an overall, gestalt picture that would reveal information that 'fell between the cracks' of other surveys'. The brief also stressed the advantages of having students involved in the project as much as possible

To address the above requirements, the Student Focus project team (lead by Associate Professor David Brenders and assisted by two postgraduate research assistants and 20 undergraduate students) panelled 24 focus groups of QUT undergraduates, six focus groups consisting of a representative mix of first through third year and/or continuing students, and 18 remaining focus groups panelled with selected categories of students (part-time students, overseas students, etc.). These groups participated in an open-ended discussion where they were asked to respond to a pre-tested set of questions about both the good aspects and the obstacles of QUT life, what they were now doing to cope with the obstacles, and what they thought QUT could do to improve service to students in these areas. Later in the discussion, the group members were asked to categorise their responses into broader themes that would express more generally the sort of problems that they experienced. The groups were audio recorded and notes were taken by two members of the project team.

This research yielded a rich picture of students' impressions of QUT. Although specific service areas received discussion, the overall picture describes dynamic, systemic factors which influence students' perceptions of QUT's level of commitment to them.

This data can be summarised in broad themes regarding students' perceptions of QUT life and their resultant impressions of QUT as a service provider:

Positive Themes

1. Access to Professional/Specialist Assistance

Students appreciate the presence on campus of professional services such as the health and counselling services, as well as the range of special assistance groups such as security, sexual harassment awareness programs, and the like. Most students have no direct experience with these services, but are happy to have them on campus nonetheless.

2. Recreation, Fitness, and Day-to-Day Conveniences

Students enjoy the easy access to recreational facilities such as the campus club, gym, etc. at Gardens Point. Although students have more experience with these services than with professional services, the availability of these services, rather than their quality, is their most salient aspect.

3. Support for Education

Services that support education, e.g., the library, limited access collection (LAC), computers, and e-mail, are widely cited as important and appreciated. However, regular use and the perception that these services are directly linked to QUT's 'core business', have engendered higher expectations for these services than are presently met.

4. Positive Attitude

Academic and general staff attitude (friendliness, approachability, empathy) makes a vivid and lasting impression on students. Students appreciate examples of such interpersonal regard.

5. Improvement Orientation

Students notice and are favourably impressed by QUT's efforts to improve its services. Some students infer an attitude of continuous improvement from these efforts.

6. Location

A majority of Gardens Point students panelled appreciate QUT's proximity to the city, river, and Botanic Gardens, which gives them the impression that they are at the 'centre of things'.

7. Real World Identity and Industry Connections

QUT's reputation as the 'university for the real world' appeals to many students who appreciate that their lecturers have regular contact with said real world in general and industry in particular.

Improvement Themes

1. Administrative Confusion

Students perceive that many aspects of QUT bureaucracy are confused and confusing, and are in conflict with, or at least indifferent to, the needs of students. Enrolments, timetabling, room allocation, and textbook and resource allocation experience a cascading set of problems that results in perceived poor service for students.

2. Balkanisation of Information

Coupled with the issue of administrative confusion is the perception that needed information is fragmented or 'Balkanised' into many separate departments. Students spend much unnecessary time piecing together this sometimes contradictory information.

3. Access to Resources

Students perceive that access to computers, technology, and information in the library (especially the LAC) poses a significant difficulty for them.

4. Campus Access

Issues such as the availability of parking, transportation by bus and train, and transport between campuses, with all their attendant frustrations and expense, were cited as significant problems in all twenty-four focus groups.

5. Quality Disappointments

Unfulfilled expectations regarding staff attitudes, the expense of the bookshop and refectory and campus aesthetics leaves many students disappointed.

6. The Student Guild

The performance of the student Guild emerged as an important issue for participants in many groups. Students feel that they know too little about the Guild, and especially about how the Guild is spending student money.

The major findings of the Student Focus project indicate that students appreciate QUT's location (specifically Gardens Point), practical ethos, and orientation towards improvement, but are frustrated by its overgrown bureaucracy and fragmented delivery of information, as well as by its failure to provide needed resources.

Each of the above themes suggest areas of high leverage for improving perceptions of QUT service quality, and dovetail nicely with the received wisdom on quality service.

Genesis of the Project and Project Team

The Student Focus project originated from the Vice-Chancellor's need to have good information about student perceptions of QUT services to aid in a university-wide initiative to promote an ethos of 'student as client'. Given the project's mission, it was deemed desirable to involve students in the project as much as possible.

As the Communication School offers an undergraduate unit, Consulting for the Communication Specialist, which teaches students to conduct applied research, the members of the class were chosen as the project team and Associate Professor David Brenders, the unit coordinator, was made the team leader. The team included 13 full-time and 7 part-time students. Communication graduate students Peter Hope and Abraham Ninan were appointed as research assistants for the project, and Marion Hayes was employed as administrative assistant. After the project proposal and budget (see Appendix 1) was approved, the team began meeting early in January to plan the project.

The team's mission was set out in the project brief; namely, to answer the question, 'What is the student experience of everything in the university except for teaching?'(2.0). Given this broad scope, the brief further stipulated that the project (a) 'take disparate information and turn it into useful feedback'(3.0), and (b) 'not...replicate previous service-specific data-gathering, but...capture an overall, gestalt picture that would reveal information that 'fell between the cracks' of other surveys' (4.2). To fully appreciate the team's choice of methods, questions, and data analysis, a brief look at the literature of quality service in higher education may be helpful.

Service Quality in the University Setting

In recent years there has been an increased emphasis on quality service across all types of business, and higher education institutions have been no exception[1] . Quality service is seen as a way of becoming more competitive by 'adding value' to the service offered to the customer—in this case, the student. These quality initiatives generally revolve around an increasing focus on client satisfaction and student orientation[2]. They emphasise delivery of service because customers pay special attention to whether a service provider is able to achieve the desired result. Hence quality in service delivery may be defined as:

> Quality = Actual Service - Expected Service[3].

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[1] Sines & Duckworth (1994).
[2] Edmond (1995).
[3] Hesket, Sasser, & Hart (1990) p. v.

At the same time, customers place high importance on the price of service and expect organisations to play fair and provide good service in exchange for their outlay.

> The value of a service to a customer = service quality (both the results realised and process by which they were achieved) divided by (price and other customer costs for acquiring the service).

The goal of quality service in the Australian university setting has become oriented toward gaining access to funds, competing for students in a competitive market (especially with a growing trend of internationalisation of Australian universities), and achieving greater levels of private funding and self-funding, since the Federal higher education budget is coming under increasing scrutiny.

However, to assume that providing quality education (in terms of good classroom instruction) for students is synonymous with providing good service to students at university is at best a limited understanding of the requirements of universities.

> We cannot simply equate quality service with quality education at university.

Recent studies exploring quality service in higher education report that poor customer service can dramatically affect the satisfaction of students. Still, universities tend to spend much time evaluating the quality of their courses and teaching performances, and very little time finding out how satisfied their core customers—students—are with other aspects of their university experience.

The cost of poor customer service can be as plain as the short-lived frustration of an individual student's experience in their daily encounter with the university, to a problem as serious as retaining students presently enrolled[4] In fact, one study found that the most frequently cited reason for students not returning to a university was problems of a program/administrative nature (e.g., course not offered, lacks career future, university too bureaucratic)[5].

The same study goes on to say that:

> ...of those students who withdraw voluntarily, the majority...did so without bothering to complete the appropriate withdrawal forms. This rather abrupt means of departure suggests that many of these individuals neither desired nor anticipated returning to the same university in the foreseeable future....This method of departure may reflect passive animosity directed toward the university because of cumbersome bureaucracy and other administrative factors. This possibility is disturbing, not only because largely non-academic factors instigated these withdrawals, but also there appear to be few, if any, mechanisms in place to redress such factors (p.75).

Given the possible consequences of poor quality service, it is important that universities recognise where service can be improved and what criteria *students* place on universities to provide satisfactory service.

[4] Sines & Duckworth (1994)
[5] Johnson & Buck (1995)

Assessing Service Quality

In general, customers assess service quality by comparing prior expectations of service (that is, expectations about the service before receiving the service) to their actual experience of that service[6]. The customer, on the whole, is satisfied if the service 'lives up to' their expectation, or is delighted if it exceeds their expectation, whereas the customer is dissatisfied if the level of service is less than their expectation.

> Customers compare expectations prior to receiving service with their actual experience of the service.

This type of comparison implies that an effective way of assessing service quality is by looking at the *gap* between customer expectations and the subsequent performance of the service provider, as rated by the experience of the customer. Hence, one of the first steps for any service organisation in improving service quality is finding out what customers expect. For universities, this presents some unique problems.

Firstly, universities face the challenge of providing services to students over a long period of time (the duration of the degree as well as possible future alumni association)[7]. Also, the student often contributes to the quality of service delivered in that attending the university and completing course work is part of the 'obligation' to complete the requirements to graduate. Thus the student is 'bound up' in the final outcome of that service.

[6] See for example, Lewis & Blooms (1983); Berry, Zeithaml, & Parasuraman (1985), cited in Hill (1995).
[7] See for example, Hartman & Schmidt (1995); Hill (1995).

Secondly, higher education proves to be a service that can be difficult for students to form definite prior expectations about (this finding is also evident in the present project)[8]. This is due in part to the fact that most undergraduate students are young or have little previous higher education service experience. As a result, many student expectations can at best be vague and based on unrealistic comparisons with high school experiences, or at worst, students may have few expectations, making it difficult for universities to evaluate their service quality. To add to this difficulty, as students mature over time at university they become more familiar with the service. This means that their expectations are likely to rise over time[9]. Understandably, these factors can make it difficult to manage service quality in universities.

Managing the Service Quality of Universities

Discussions with all types of customers show that they expect service basics from service organisations. Nevertheless, it is also known that when an organisation fails to deliver service to the expectations of the customer, the customer's expectations rise even higher[10]. For students, these expectations can rise due to exposure to the university experience over time (for a majority of students, at least 3-5 years).

Accordingly, it is important for universities to realise that each time there is a failure in service, or a student is presented with other service options by a competitor, it makes it more difficult to close the gap between the student's expectations of service and their perception of service—possibly enough to make them a reluctant client.

> Students are like other customers: 'they expect fundamentals, not fanciness; performance, not empty promises'[11].

On the other hand, universities also have the opportunity to recognise how they can close the gap between expectations and perceptions, and then exceed them to develop customer loyalty to the point where 'no other' is considered.

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[8] Hartman & Schmidt (1995); Hill (1995).
[9] Hill (1995).
[10] Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml (1991).
[11] Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml (1991)

The research on service quality shows that customers generally use five criteria for assessing service quality:

- Tangibles: the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials;
- Reliability: the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;
- Responsiveness: the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;
- Assurance: the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence; and
- Empathy : the caring, individualised attention provided to the customer[12].

Other research has shown that customers most value reliability, while at the same time service providers believe that responsiveness is the most critical aspect of service[13]. One explanation for this apparent difference in value between organisations and their customers is that responsiveness is easier to provide and control, being delivered by service personnel, while reliability needs an organisation-wide focus, which requires more time and money.

It is generally agreed then that it is most important to get the service right the first time. This will help keep the expectations of the student from rising to a level where the university can only fail. If this service is not reliable, then students are likely to become much more critical in how they receive service the next time.

> Be *reliable*. Getting service right the first time helps meet the customer's expectations.

[12] See Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml (1991).
[13] Cina (1990).

Given these criteria for providing valued customer service and meeting expectations, the challenge for universities is to find ways to think strategically about the delivery of service. That is, to be mindful of how students will evaluate service to manage the service outcome so that what is delivered can actually exceed expectations the first time, or recover from failure when service does not go well. This involves anticipating problems as well as identifying the range of the student's experience of service.

Some specific factors which can influence the consumer's expectations include:

- word of mouth communications (what consumers hear from other consumers);
- personal needs (determined by individual characteristics and circumstances);
- past experience of the service (or a related service);
- external communications from the service provider (for example, printed advertisements, TV commercials, brochures, and oral promises from service provider employees); and
- price.[14]

Considering these factors which help form a student's 'script' of expectations, Hartman & Schmidt (1995) provide an astute quality service strategy for satisfying students:

> Universities, through all of their communications, should help students more fully focus on the entire education process by developing expectations and goals for the education experience. The potential benefits of helping students become familiar with the process by which education is delivered as well as the skills that are developed are enormous. Programs that introduce students to the institution's intellectual world and support services (e.g., placement office, advising opportunities) will increase the likelihood that students will evaluate the outcomes of the experience as well as the performance of the service provider (p.214).

[14] Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry (1990), cited in Hill (1995).

The Student Focus project aimed to promote the benefit of service quality by focusing on the experiences of one of QUT's major customers—students. By having students come to the university to discuss student perceptions (instead of the university having to presume student problems), QUT has initiated the opportunity to set priorities and take action. The focus groups fulfilled the need to identify the range of experiences students have had while studying at QUT and their encounters with the university's services.

The Choice of Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interview procedure grew out of the focused interview developed by Merton[15] to assess the perceptions persons have of a specified message, product, or event and the meanings that they assign to these perceptions (see Appendix 2). The procedure allows a moderator to first elicit perceptions using pre-planned, open-ended questions and then follow up answers with more specific probing questions, sometimes pre-planned, sometimes impromptu. Although essentially an open-ended discussion of a specified topic, the moderator's skill lies in his/her ability to continually focus the discussion without biasing the responses. This procedure works best when used to obtain the elusive and subjective meanings that persons supply to things, and/or when the investigator does not precisely know what the relevant perceptions are *a priori*.

The focus group interview seemed an ideal procedure for this project for a number of reasons. First, the open-ended nature of the research question posed by the project brief, 'What is the student experience of everything in the university other than teaching?' necessitated an open-ended research procedure. The project goals of 'synthesising disparate information', and 'obtaining an overall gestalt picture that identified those things that 'fell between the cracks' of specific service areas', required that the team allow students to tell of their experiences in a relatively uninhibited and unstructured way. Secondly, the team needed a method to ensure that all relevant information was organised and interpretable.

[15]see R.K. Merton, M. Fiske, & P. L. Kendall (1990) The focused interview: A manual of problems and procedures (2nd ed.). New York: Free Press.

Therefore, the focus group procedure had some distinct advantages. It could meaningfully elicit student perceptions of the overall QUT experience, and the people, messages and events that students felt were relevant to that experience. While survey procedures are good at assessing the frequency of opinion about a particular service, the accumulation of this data across services would never add up to the gestalt impressions of students.

When an area of discussion was unclear, the focus group moderator could follow up with more specific probing questions. In this way, information could be clarified and elaborated, and the interpretations of the moderator and others could be validated or revised. The team could also test the validity of 'themes' that developed by asking the students themselves to help make sense of the data that emerged from the discussion.

The potential drawbacks of the procedure were the possibilities that: (a) the discussion would generate an endless list of unrelated, and largely personal, subjective gripes, (b) the moderator's questions would guide or bias the responses, or that (c) later data interpretation would be guided by the subjective inclinations of the team. These possible drawbacks were kept in check by careful formulation and pre-testing of the focus group questions (see Appendix 3), conducting practice focus groups, encouraging debriefing discussion and continuous team criticism, and refining the work of the focus group moderators. In addition, student participants themselves were encouraged, whenever possible, to check, classify, and revise their statements and challenge any erroneous interpretations made by the team.

Sampling

A pool of 768 undergraduate students was obtained from the Planning and Statistics Section. Since it is inappropriate to use focus group data to make quantitative inferences about a larger population as one normally does with surveys (e.g., 'based on our sample, 34% of QUT students agree that...'), the goal of sampling was not a representative sample *per se* (i.e., one that reflects the relative frequency of relevant characteristics in the population). Rather, the sample was assembled such that the diversity of QUT students was represented. That is, samples of first year, second year, and third year and/or continuing students were drawn at random, but with the provision that factors such as faculty and campus[16] were evenly distributed within the groups, rather than by their relative frequency.

Eighteen specialist groups were also panelled, after discussion with the Planning and Statistics and Equity sections, as representing a good distribution of those that fall outside of the mainstream of students (and/or who, by virtue of their small numbers, would not be adequately 'heard' in relatively small random samples): fee-paying overseas students, part-time students, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students, socio-economically disadvantaged (Q-Step) students, students with a disability, Kelvin Grove students, Carseldine students, and students who travel between campuses.

Members of the project team developed a phone interview protocol (Appendix 4) and used it to solicit participation from students on the sampling list. As incentives for participating in the study, students were promised a $20.00 gift voucher from the QUT bookshop and a free 'Student Focus' T-Shirt designed by the project team with the help of Peter Hinton in the Public Affairs Section.[17]

Ten students were assigned to each focus group. Actual participation ranged from 13 in one over-subscribed group to three in one rather disappointing group scheduled during a week of continual rain. Overall, 145 students participated in the focus groups, the average number of participants in the groups was six.

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[16] Campus specific focus groups were panelled as well.

[17] The team is given to understand that these shirts are considered *tres chic* and jealously coveted by the cognoscenti of Brisbane urban hip.

Conduct of the Focus Groups

The focus groups were held in either the Z1004 meeting room or an appropriate room at the Kelvin Grove or Carseldine campus. Continuous recording of the discussion was made by a cassette recorder and three pressure zone microphones supplied by the Audiovisual Services Section. Participants sat in chairs arranged in a circle facing three microphones placed on a table in the centre. The meetings lasted two hours.

For each group, four members of the project team were present. Team leader David Brenders and graduate students Peter Hope and Abraham Ninan took turns as moderator. The moderator of the group facilitated the discussion, asked the pre-planned questions and followed up with rehearsed or spontaneous probes, and otherwise served as spokesperson for the team.

Two other team members served as data takers. Their role was to write down responses, categorised by participant and question, using a data sheet designed by the project team (see Appendix 5). To improve the ease and accuracy of this task, each of the two data takers was responsible for only the one half of the group that faced them. The fourth team member wrote the participants' comments on butcher paper for later reference and discussion within the group.

When participants arrived for the focus group, they were given a name tag on which they wrote their first name only. They were offered tea, coffee, or juice, and were chatted to by team members on topics unrelated to the project, in order to break the ice for the later discussion. The moderator of the group began with a short explanation of the project, a description of the procedures, and introduction of the other members of the project team. He assured the participants that although the discussion was tape recorded, this was for purposes of data collection only and that, in any case, only their first names would be used. The discussion started with a general ice-breaking question and the tape was started. After the two hour discussion, the participants were thanked and given their gift vouchers and T-shirts (later group members were also asked to fill out a short questionnaire not included in this report). The team members then held a 15 minute de-briefing to share perceptions and complete note-taking and data filing.

Student Focus: Project Report of a Student-Centered Study of University Service at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

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Focus Group Questions

The focus group questions were refined by the moderators and the project team, and pre-tested on practice focus groups before the actual study began. Specific probes and prompts evolved as needed, and were shared among the moderators during team meetings; when a new tack was being developed or tested, all three moderators would attend the focus group.

The goals of the questions were to discover:

- What students liked about their QUT experience;
- What obstacles students encountered while attending QUT;
- What students were currently doing to overcome these obstacles; and
- What they thought QUT could do to help them surmount the obstacles or challenges they faced.

A final, wrap-up question asked participants what they thought constituted the ideal relationship between students and QUT. The complete question protocol used by moderators is given below[18].

Focus Group Questions

I. Icebreaking Phase

Q1: Of all your experiences at QUT which are the most memorable?

Q2: Can you remember your first day? What was that like?

Q3: How has life at QUT been different from what you expected?

Q4: What's a typical day at QUT like?

II. Positive Aspects

Q1: What things about QUT do you like the most?

Q2: Why do you like them?

Q3: What is it about QUT that makes these things so likeable?

[18]And in Appendix 3.

III. Obstacle Phase

Q1. What aspects of QUT life are (obstacles/difficulties/hassles) for you?

Q2: What makes them a problem for you?

Q3: Do other people have similar experiences?

Q4: What have people done so far to deal with these issues?

Q5: What have you thought of trying?

Q6: How can QUT help?

Q7: Which problems should QUT tackle first?

IV. Identifying Themes

Let's see if we can put this idea into smaller groupings

Q1: Can we group these things together?

(Co-moderator takes coloured pens and circles similar ideas, based on the group's suggestions.)

V. Relationship to QUT

We've looked at some of the good things about QUT as well as some of the hassles. We've identified some trends. Can we use this information to start to talk about the sorts of things that would make QUT more student centred?

Q1: What is the ideal relationship between students and QUT?

Q2: What is the role of students in building this relationship?

Q3: What is the role of QUT?

As indicated in the question protocol, the questioning itself was divided into five phases. In the ice-breaking phase, the moderator began by asking a relatively easy, non-threatening question, such as each person's most memorable experience at QUT. This question was designed to get participants thinking generally about their student experience, while enabling them the freedom to construct any sort of answer around something they thought was funny, aggravating, pleasing, or whatever. Most participants were able to respond to this question. If not, the moderator moved to an even easier experience to remember, the person's typical day at QUT and what it was like. Although these ice-breaking questions were designed merely to get people talking and their minds on the general topic area, some good information was recorded in this initial phase.

Once the moderator was confident that discussion had reached a certain momentum, he moved on to the second phase, the discussion of positive aspects of QUT life. At this point many participants had a difficult time generating more than one or two responses. After this became obvious, the moderator rephrased the question as, 'If we had to re-build QUT from the ground up, what aspects of the current QUT would we keep pretty much as they are?' As some students seemed to feel that for something about QUT to be positive, it had to be unequivocally good or even wonderful, the 'what should we keep' follow-up removed this onus. Responses to this question usually proved more accessible to participants. Each positive aspect of QUT life was listed on a sheet of butcher paper in view of the participants and kept for later review. A complete summary of each participant's contribution was taken down by the data-takers.

When it was clear that the group had exhausted QUT's good points, the moderator moved the discussion to the obstacles, challenges, or hassles that students faced. Answers to this question usually generated a lot of discussion. When a point was unclear, the moderator probed with 'What do you mean by that?' or 'Can you give me an example?' When the difficulty was seen to be more than a momentary hassle the moderator probed with, 'What are you doing currently to overcome this obstacle?' This probe was used to bring out the severity of the problem and how much it was affecting the student's life at QUT. At an appropriate time in the discussion, the moderator asked, 'What do you think QUT could do to help overcome this difficulty?' Once again, each obstacle was noted on butcher paper, and a full summary of the points made was written down by the data takers.

Participants were then told that although they could add to the list of positives or negatives at any time, the group should now think about how the lists themselves suggested a smaller number of overall 'themes' or categories. As participants suggested clusters of items and named the clusters, the themes and points that fell under them were written on a third piece of butcher paper. 'One-off' themes were allowed, but participants were encouraged to think about how their concerns might be connected.

After the group had completed the 'thematisation' task, they were asked to respond to a final question on what they felt was the ideal relationship between themselves and QUT. If this concept proved too difficult, it was rephrased as 'What expectations do you have of QUT?' Answers to this question varied; mature aged students gave very articulate and subtle answers to this question, sometimes in the language of quality service (never mentioned by the team), while younger students sometimes replied with banal truisms such as 'an education'.

At this point the group was concluded, the participants thanked, and the bookshop vouchers and T-shirts distributed. When the participants had left, the team labelled and filed all the materials and engaged in a fifteen minute de-briefing to take further notes on the high points of the discussion.

Data Analysis

After the focus groups were completed, the project team transferred the information from the coders' sheets, butcher paper, and tapes into a written record of each group. Each of these focus group records contained: (a) the points each participant made, as transcribed by the coders, (b) the positive and negative aspects and resultant 'themes' as written on the butcher paper, and (c) verbatim transcripts of critical incidents or quotable quotes taken from the tape to fill out the other information. These focus group records were collated and bound into focus group information binders that the team then worked from (Appendix 6).

Each team member then worked through the focus group information in the binder and coded it by topic and by theme across focus groups. This information was discussed in team meetings and a list of overall topics emerged. This data was tabulated by Abraham Ninan and checked by other team members.

The team also grappled with how to accurately synthesise this information: that is, how to accurately represent the data in a way that would do more than list atomistic problems or concerns, but reveal overall patterns interconnecting the QUT service arena. While some responses appeared to be (and were) atomistic or one-offs (e.g., no M&Ms in the vending machines as obstacle; good motorcycle parking as a positive aspect of GP life), many apparently isolated obstacles or concerns suggested systemic effects. For example, some students are frustrated about the lack of their bank's ATM on campus (2,7,10,17,19,22,24). They also complain of the bookshop's inability to make an EFTPOS transaction of less than $10.00, and their inability to get cash out with a transaction (2,10,17).

Taken together, this suggests that student perceptions of the bookshop are influenced by the lack of ATMs as they cope with the former by making possibly unrealistic demands of the latter. To take a more systematic example, enrolments emerged very strongly as a hassle or obstacle for QUT students. Interestingly, the enrolment problem seemed to cascade into many other areas to create ongoing systemic obstacles for students.

Results

Presenting the results of the focus groups is not as straightforward as one might imagine. Although a table is given in appendix seven which lists the number of times a particular topic was broached in the 24 focus groups, this data is deceiving in two ways. First, it creates a somewhat false impression that the most cited areas reveal the biggest or most important problems, rather than merely the most salient, obvious, or chronically irritating ones (e.g., parking). However, the frequency of responses (and themes) across differing focus groups does reveal the *robustness* of an issue—its ability to transcend other factors such as year, faculty, major, country of origin, etc., but not necessarily its relative importance.

Second, listing issues can create the impression that each is an independent issue to be solved by the relevant service area. A fuller look at the focus group data reveals that these problems or obstacles are often not independent of one another; rather, they are frequently symptomatic of a more general and systemic issue (such as the 'Balkanisation' of needed information across disparate administrative areas), or are inter-related in a cascading way, where one problem (or Balkanised 'solution'!) creates further problems down the line.

Therefore, a second section explores interrelationships between the responses and offers a set of themes for understanding this data. This analysis will reveal systemic and cascading forces that describe the dynamics of the problem.

Positive Aspects of QUT Life

Students find many aspects of QUT positive, valuable, and enjoyable. Firstly, this attitude is sometimes the result of the availability of a service ('It's good that QUT provides a: counselling service, health service, sexual harassment awareness program, etc.'). Although few students in the focus groups had first-hand knowledge of these services, their presence on campus is nonetheless seen as positive. Secondly, at other times, student impressions are the result of actual use of and appreciation for a service (e.g., campus club, pool, internet access, etc). The most commonly cited examples involve availability of technology such as computers (although as we shall see, student expectations for easier access to this technology figures largely in their disappointment with QUT). A third plus in the eyes of students is their ability to capitalise on QUT's traditional assets, such as its location (especially the Gardens Point Campus) and its reputation. A fourth class of comment reflects student recognition and appreciation of the attitude of QUT staff and the efforts that QUT has made at improving its services (including the Focus Group project itself).

Positive Themes

Given the responses above, and further clarifying information available in the focus group transcripts, seven themes can be derived which summarise students' positive attitudes toward QUT:

1. Access to Professional and Specialist Assistance
2. Recreation, Fitness, and Day-to-Day Conveniences
3. Support for Education
4. Positive Attitude
5. Improvement Orientation
6. Location
7. 'Real World' Identity and Industry Connections.

Theme 1: Access to Professional and Specialist Assistance

Although few respondents discussed professional and specialist services as a user of such services, students tend to agree that services such as the health service (22), counselling service (9,14) (GP and KG), security (11,12,16), and sexual harassment awareness programs (6,11,19) are important for the university to have (3,4,6,9,11,14,15,16,17,18,19). Users of these services report good experiences (3,4,15).

> The availability of services is good—doctors, counselling, etc. are familiar with the uni lifestyle and its demands.
> Michelle (3)
> First year, Health

> Campus security puts you at ease.
> Hooman (12)
> First year, Education

From a service perspective, students appreciate the existence of the service as a convenience if and when it is needed.

Theme 2: Recreation, Fitness, and Day-to-Day Conveniences

Students often list recreational and fitness services among the positive aspects of QUT. Many Gardens Point students appreciate the Gardens Point campus club (2,3,5,10,11,12,13,15,16,18,19) as well as the gym (3,7,10,12,13,18,19), and pool (2,3,7,10,15,18,19). The band concerts on the kidney lawn (6,11,18), the bookshop (10,14) and second-hand bookstore (2,3,19), Degrees cafe (10,16,19) and other conveniences such as banking (14), the refectory (7,11), and social events and clubs (3,6,16) also received mention. Kelvin Grove and Carseldine students mentioned bookshop, refectory, and banking facilities as welcome (14,17). Carseldine students also mentioned access to the sports grounds as positive (17). As with professional services, the availability of the service was the most salient aspect for students; few discussed these services in terms of their quality, aside from saying that they liked them.

> The second-hand book exchange that the Guild runs is good—when you find out about it.
> Tim (18)
> First year, Civil Engineering

> I think the gym facilities are good.
> Natasha (13)
> First year, Life Science
> Q-Step student

Theme 3: Support for Education

Services that support education (library, limited access collection, computers, e-mail/internet access) are widely cited as important and appreciated aspects of QUT. Respondents in 10 different focus groups cited the library and its services (LAC, CD-ROM searches) as important and generally good (1,3,4,6,7,8,9,10,11,12), often citing recent improvements to facilities and services. Twelve groups cited computer facilities as important to their education, and improvements such as 24 hour access as appreciated (2,3,4,7,8,9,13,14,16,17,18,19). A similar number cited e-mail and internet access as positives (1,2,3,4,5,7,9,11,13,15,16,17,18). However, unlike other areas such as professional services and recreational facilities, regular use and, possibly, the perception that these services are linked to QUT's 'core business' of education has engendered higher expectations for these services in the minds of students. While students appreciate these services and applaud improvements in them, they are still fairly critical of the quality and client orientation of these services (as will be discussed in later sections).

Theme 4: Positive Attitude

Although moderators tended to avoid discussion of lecturers *per se* as being outside of the project brief, students appeared to take notice of the general attitude of their lecturing (and administrative) staff as a service issue and commented on its good (and bad) aspects. Students applauded examples of lecturer and tutor availability (3, 7, 9,14,16,17,18), approachability, friendliness (6,7,14,17,18), and respect for the student as person (14,17).

> Lecturers take an interest in you. In first year, we started out with about 400 and that's pretty big, and yet there still seems to be that extra contact there and they're quite willing to help out in any way they can.
> Kelly (6)
> Final year, Nursing

Academic and general staff attitude can make a very vivid and lasting impression; in some cases a single interpersonal contact with a staff person constituted a quite meaningful and memorable story for students. The following students offered these stories as their most memorable QUT experiences:

> When I started university at the beginning of last year, I was promised a scholarship by my government....When second semester came the money had to be paid, and my government was still saying that I had the scholarship. So, I went to see the Dean and explained everything to him. He was quite understanding to the whole process and he suggested that university would carry the fees for that particular semester until the scholarship came.
> Jessie (4)
> Continuing, Law
> Fee-paying overseas student

> I haven't studied for a long time and I came in as a mature-aged student so I had no idea whether I could do it or not....When I went to go get my result I took my husband because I couldn't bear to find out my result. I knew the fails were right at the bottom of the list so I stood a few metres away and I said to him, `Go and look at the bottom and if my name's not there then call me and I'll come'. So he looks at the bottom and says, `Your name's not there'. And so I said, 'Oh, well, then I passed'. And then we looked at the passes and there were 200 students on the list...and my name wasn't there. And then I got worried....And then I looked at the credits and my name wasn't there either, and then I looked at the distinctions and at the top of the distinctions my name was there and I had such a shock I started crying—I couldn't believe it—my lecturer was there and she gave me the biggest hug and she said, 'Why are you crying? You deserved it'. And I felt yeah, from that day on, I could do it.
> Nicole (15)
> Continuing, Social Science
> Part-time student with disability

Such stories reveal the vivid and enduring interpersonal meaning that students give to staff contact. An attitude that the staff member cares for them as a person tends to go a long way toward creating an impression of good service, even when a solution is not immediately forthcoming. And, of course, some unfortunately chosen rhetorical tactics can create a vivid negative impression that endures also.

> We had a great first lecture [said sarcastically]...I think it was the Dean of the faculty...he told us that 70% of you are going to drop out.
> Peter (1)
> Final year, Architecture
> Part-time student

> One lecturer said to me, `Well, you don't look like you have a disability'.
> Lyn (15)
> Continuing, Arts
> Student with disability

Possibly because of the smaller size of the Carseldine campus, the Carseldine library, lecturing, canteen, and administrative staff received very positive mention for their friendliness, approachability and willingness to help (1,12,17,22).

> It's a lot friendlier as a result, between the lecturers and the students themselves, as a result of smaller numbers
> Kate (12)
> First year, Humanities

> I find, at Carseldine anyway, that the library staff, admin staff, and even faculty staff are really helpful
> Dion (22)
> First year, Business
> ATSI student

Theme 5: Improvement Orientation

Students also tended to notice and appreciate the improvements that QUT makes to its facilities and programs. Students consistently acknowledged areas that were 'fixed', 'improved', 'new', 'updated', 'upgraded', and 'better'. The main topic areas of improvement were the library and LAC (1,4,7,15), computing facilities (2,4,9,24), refectory (4, 7,15), and buildings (10,16,24), especially Gardens Point's Z Block and its new teaching technology (5,10,12,16,18,24). The focus group project itself was cited by some students as evidence of QUT's desire to improve (2). Some of these students inferred an 'attitude of continual improvement' from these efforts (6,23).

> From my point of view, from everything I've seen, everything seems to be always continually improving. They're always trying to improve themselves. In all the different areas I've noticed that.
> Jason (23)
> Continuing, Science
> Part-time student

> Quality of food has really improved.
> Jenny (7)
> Continuing, Health
> Part-time student

> I think they did a pretty good job with Z block. Just the fact that it's new.
> Marie (10)
> Continuing, Marketing

> [Z block] high tech, great stuff.
> Johnathon (24)
> Continuing, Business
> Part-time student

Theme 6: Location

Sixteen focus groups expressed 'location' (of the Gardens Point Campus) as a positive aspect of QUT. Eleven of these groups specifically mentioned the city Botanic Gardens and the Brisbane River (1,2,3,5,7,10,12,19,22,24). Other positive aspects were a sense of convenience due to the central location (1,3,5,6,12,15,17,18,22,24) and a sense that they (the student) were, 'at the centre of things'(6). Many respondents found the Botanic Gardens added aesthetic value to the Gardens Point campus and went to the Gardens to relax or eat lunch (3,5,11,12,19).

> I find that the actual location of the uni suits me. I've studied elsewhere before and I find just the fact that the proximity to the gardens and the city—I don't know, you feel as if you're part of the world, you're not isolated on some campus where, you know it's all—I just feel you can be part of what's happening
> Leah (6)
> Final year, Interior Design

Respondents who offered location as a positive feature of QUT spoke almost exclusively of the Gardens Point campus. Students at other campuses did not tend to list location among their positive features, although Kelvin Grove students listed their general environment (landscaping, trees, and shade) as a positive feature of their campus. Positive mentions of the Carseldine campus tended to stress a sense of community and its uncrowded feel (1,12,14,22).

> It's like a rest home out there. And it's quiet. You can really study.
> Sylvie (14)
> First year, Health Information Management

Students appreciated not only the relatively quiet atmosphere (which turns up as a criticism in the minds of other students), but also that access to resources such as the library (1,12,15,17,22), parking and transport, (17,21,22), security (12,17), and friendly staff (1,12,17,21,22) made the Carseldine experience an enjoyable one.

Theme 7: 'Real World' Identity and Industry Connections

Students commented favourably on QUT's commitment to the 'real world application' of its courses, as well as its perceived ability to aid employment in said real world by virtue of its reputation and industry connections. Students perceive that their course is relevant to industry by way of curricular design (2,4,5,6,7,8,9,11,13,18) and the connections their lecturers have with industry (1,2,5,9).

> I would choose QUT over UQ. It is the university for the real world and it really shows.
> Amelia (13)
> Final year, Law/Justice Studies

> QUT recognises that it is producing a product for the market place, and to compete, it needs to have the best product.
> Andrew (2)
> Continuing, Justice Studies
> Part-time ATSI student

> [My] course is really practical— we are always going on site and have guest lecturers who work in the industry—so we are always kept up-to-date.
> Karyn (24)
> Continuing, Interior Design
> Part-time student

In one case, the course itself was the only thing keeping this student at QUT:

> [The course] seems to be very well respected outside the university, but if it was UQ, I'd be there in a flash.
> Kim (16)
> First year, Business

Students also appreciated the QUT reputation and expressed their confidence in its ability to open doors for them (2,5,6,7,11,16,19).

> [QUT degree] is good for name-dropping
> Mary Jane (5)
> Final year, Arts

> You've got this feeling that you're on the cutting edge.
> Deren (6)
> Final year, Law

Many students also favourably commented on the job placement and internship programs that were available for them (2,5,6,10,11,18,19).

Each of the above aspects are potential assets for QUT. They are a source of positive feelings about the university and may also serve as springboards for furthering the client focus of the university. Some of these assets may as yet be underutilised. For example, QUT's 'real world' orientation and industry contacts have been cultivated over a period of time and figure largely in its current advertising; however, improvement orientation and staff attitudes may be areas of internal public relations that may yet to be fully realised. Location may also serve as a counterpoint to the generally negative attitude toward parking and transport (discussed in the following section).

Obstacles, Hassles, and Problems Encountered at QUT

As well as providing good information about the positive aspects of QUT, students were also forthcoming about the obstacles and problems that they faced. Although some students were rather vocal in their criticisms, on the whole, the team was provided with thoughtful and considered information regarding areas of improvement for QUT. As was the case with the previous section, a mere listing of student comments encourages an inaccurate, atomistic, 'snapshot' understanding of what is often a systemic or cascading set of issues (see appendix 8 for such a listing). Therefore, this section will combine this information with clarifying data from the focus group transcripts to elaborate six different themes.

Improvement Themes

The team interpreted the data above as illuminating two major themes about QUT service:

1. Administrative Confusion
2. Balkanisation of Information

as well as four subsidiary themes:

3. Access to Resources
4. Campus Access
5. Quality Disappointments
6. Student Guild Issues

The above themes are not orthogonal, as lack of information (2) can certainly contribute to administrative confusion (1). However, each theme has as its central focus, its own unique components, and expresses systematic or cascading (i.e., where one problem creates another and another) forces at work.

There are, at times, discernible links between themes. For example, under the theme of campus access (3), students report that parking at GP and KG is expensive and time consuming; therefore, they limit their trips to campus and when they do come to campus they leave as soon as possible to avoid additional expense. Under the theme of quality disappointments (6), students report that QUT doesn't 'feel like a university', in that the campus doesn't offer the diversions and 'ambience' they expected.

Although discussed separately by students, these issues may be systemic in that one aspect reciprocally reinforces the other: that is, the hassles of parking discourage the peripatetic loitering that would create the campus ambience that would make staying on campus longer a worthwhile option.

It is also worth noting that the team was surprised by the robustness of these themes. That is, most of these issues revealed themselves in the majority of groups. These themes even dominated groups which were empanelled to explore specific interest areas such as ATSI students, Q-Step students, and students with a disability. Data from these groups revealed that students mentioned a few things of interest to their particular situation and then reliably replicated the sorts of concerns voiced by students in every other group. This robustness of findings convinced the team that they were recovering more than an idiosyncratic list of 'gripes', but were converging on the general issues relevant to most QUT students. Each of these themes will be addressed in turn.

Theme 1: Administrative Confusion

Students in the majority of focus groups expressed concerns about QUT administrative procedures regarding either enrolments (1,2,3,4,6,10,15,20,23), timetabling (2,3,4,8,9,10,11,12,15,18,20,23,24), or course changes (6,20) as a significant obstacle to them. Students describe these tasks as being unnecessarily time-consuming, confusing, unreliable, and inconsiderate of the students' perspective. Many of these procedural problems cascade into one another and create further obstacles concerning lecture room (3,7,8,10,11,15,17,18) and tutorial allocations (3,8,11,13,15) and the availability of texts and readings from the bookshop (2,5,11,15,20) and LAC (4,8,15,23). These issues not only irritate students and create an atmosphere of poor service which affects the morale of students (and staff), but has a direct negative impact on learning, as students cannot settle down in their courses with all their necessary materials until well into the semester.

Students themselves attribute these problems to administrative confusion—a bureaucratic mare's nest of unnecessary or counterintuitive rules (malignant bureaucracy) and unproductive sequences of action (lack of administrative coordination). Coordination problems, especially in the areas of enrolments and timetabling, result in resilient *cascading confusions* for students and lecturers alike.

Malignant Bureaucracy

At times, administrative procedures are seen by students to be at direct odds with their legitimate needs, or appear to have been created with no thought to their impact on students. When asked about his most memorable experience with QUT, one student remarked:

> The bureaucracy of the whole place. It's probably worse than Social Security and Austudy put together. There's just so many hoops you have to jump through to get started.
> Matthew (14)
> Final year, Education

When asked about her relationship with QUT, another student remarked:

> I told a few people up here that I was coming to QUT, and they just went, 'Oh, my God, you're going to have so many problems with administration'. It's got a really bad reputation administration-wise.
> Kellie (20)
> Final year, Law

Coupled with the number of bureaucratic procedures that students must comply with is the perception that procedures are not put there in their interest, and are sometimes at odds with their interests.

> They [QUT administration] see a problem and they try to find what seems to that person at that particular time the best bureaucratic way to solve it, so all their legal bases are covered. But they don't actually get out of their chair and say 'What does this person want? What is the quickest, easiest way?'
> Gary (15)
> Final year, Human Resource Management
> Part-time student with disability

> There was a bit of a hassle when I got my student ID card 'cause the course structure was based at Kelvin Grove, but all my subjects were at Carseldine. And so I went to get my photo taken for my ID card at Carseldine, and they told me I couldn't get it down there. I had to go to Kelvin Grove to get it done. So I had to go out to Kelvin Grove on one day, and all the time I was having to pay full fare for trains and things like that 'cause it was just a hassle and I didn't get my student ID until about the fourth week, 'cause I only went out to Kelvin Grove once a week.
> Ben (11)
> First year, Education

Rules are seen as primarily negative injunctions or complex demands, which, as they multiply, transmogrify into part of the obstacle that the student is trying to surmount. Sometimes this bureaucratic metastasis is merely irritating (or amusing).

> [A sign in the refectory] says 'Please leave bags outside' and then on top of the bag rack it's got 'Security says don't leave your belongings'. What are you supposed to do?
> Marie (10)
> Continuing, Marketing

At other times students report bureaucracy as an active impediment to learning. As one student with a disability describes her frustration with procedures for getting a note-taker:

> It's really difficult; you go at the beginning of the semester to the Disability Officer and she says, 'What subjects are you doing?' It used to be up to you to go to a lecturer. Now the Disability Officer has to write a note to the lecturer and then the lecturer has to find a note-taker...So you go to see the Disability Officer. They send a letter to the lecturer. Then the lecturer gets up and announces in the lecture, and this one subject it was the third lecture before he even got the letter, and then he announced it. Then somebody had to go and see him, they weren't allowed to just go and see the Disability Officer. So then he had to send a letter to the disability section saying who had volunteered. And then they have to OK it. Well, I'm still waiting for the OK And I have an exam for that subject. Whereas if you went to the lecturer and said, 'Hey, I need a note-taker'. And he got up and said, 'Who's going to volunteer to take notes in this lecture?', it worked fine. But now you have all these letters going backwards and forwards while it's nearly the end of the semester and I still don't have a note-taker.
> Nicole (15)
> Continuing, Social Science
> Part-time student with disability

At other times what starts as a service to students is nullified by valuing bureaucratic imperatives over student needs or a simple lack of empathy:

> Last year when I was really sick around exam time, I wasn't strong enough to write. And so uni was great in that they hired a supervisor for me...and they taped my exam, and it was discovered that the tape wasn't working. So then they said I could sit the deferred exam or stay, [but] 'We prefer you to stay'. So I had to do that three hour exam again, and for someone very ill, y'know. And at the end of that three hours, I did a crap performance second time around, because I was just exhausted and I failed. So on one hand it was great they provided that facility, and on the other hand y'know, it's their technology: check it before you give it to me.
> Michele (3)
> First year, Health

At best, malignant bureaucracy reinforces the perceptions that administration does not take responsibility for its actions and that the onus rests on the student, who is faced with a continuous administrative 'run around'.

> Administration, the whole thing, like it's so unorganised. At the beginning of *every* semester. Very unorganised. Just the Guild fees, my Guild fees getting mucked up. But they said, 'No! You have not paid them'. And I said, 'Yes I have', and I just showed them my receipt; what if I had thrown that out? They wouldn't have given me my student card.
> Nicole (17)
> Continuing, Arts/Law

> I have one big problem with the administration being at Kelvin Grove. Like, one time, they lost my enrolment form or something, and it had to be in the next day, and I wanted to get a new enrolment form at Gardens Point. They said no, we don't keep them here, you have to go to Kelvin Grove to get something like that, and I actually had to drive up there. By accident, I actually got it faxed through to me at home, and stuff like that. So, I saved the trip, but if they had it in Gardens Point, I could have just gone and put it in the box.
> Sam (19)
> Final year, Construction Management
> Part-time student

> Well you can hand in your enrolment form and your first change of subject form and they will totally lose [it] and you'll get a late fee.
> Nicole (17)
> Continuing, Arts/Law

As a result, QUT students may come to see the administration as uncaring, unprofessional, or hypocritical.

> I think professionalism is a big thing. A lot of people that I've had contact with in administration, mainly through the problem I had with enrolment was a lack of professionalism. They don't seem to give two hoots about my problem....They treat it like, 'Ah, well?' Being in the service industry and a lot of more professional things it's like, 'Yeah, we've got to do this. We've got to please the customer'. And I see myself as a customer to QUT.
> Bruno (23)
> Continuing, Construction Management

> The bookstore doesn't get books on time. The bookstore doesn't get the stuff until three or four weeks into the semester....and you get, 'Oh, we're just having a bit of trouble'. But they would not accept that from us if we wanted to hand an assignment in three or four weeks late. They expect us to be professional as students but they don't come back with that.
> Andrew (2)
> Continuing, part-time, Justice Studies
> ATSI student

> [I expect] to be treated like a customer. I work in the sales industry and I know that some of the experiences I've had at this university—I would never treat a customer like that. It is not that they're treating us as bad customers, it is just that they don't even recognise us as customers. We're just students and that's it.
> James(8)
> Final year, Economics
> Part-time student

Although students report that experiences with unhelpful bureaucratic procedures and unprofessional service recovery create and reinforce the impression that QUT doesn't care about service to students, the perceptions that QUT administration is confused and confusing is due largely to perceptions that QUT administration is uncoordinated in several key areas of their 'core business': enrolment, timetabling, access to lectures/tutorials, and access to texts and materials.

Lack of Administrative Coordination

Students report that many of their problems involve a lack of communication/coordination, especially among the administration involved in enrolment (2,4,13,20,23), timetables (3,11,12,14,16,17,20), the bookshop (2,3,7,10,11,15,16,17) and library (2,9,10,15,16,19,21,24), and between the bookshop and lecturers (2,11,15,20).

> I just think that the administration, from my point of view, it looks fragmented.
> Jim (10)
> Continuing, Law

> The right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.
> Raoul (15)
> First year, Engineering
> Student with disability

Each of these areas will be discussed separately, followed by a discussion of how problems in these areas cascade into one another.

Enrolment

For many students, there is a good deal of ambiguity surrounding the enrolment procedure. For example, they are asked to choose unit offerings before they know the day and time they are offered (see next section) and/or whether subsequent changes to the timetable will result in unit clashes.

> What's happening here is that we have to choose our subjects first then we see the timetable and then we all madly run around and change our subjects.
> Deborah (8)
> First year, Social Science
> Part-time student

More striking, some students are left wondering if they are enrolled at all, given administrative mistakes and lack of timely feedback.

> After you send in your application, you do not get your confirmation of enrolment for a few weeks, so you kind of like think, 'Am I really in this course? Did I do it right?'
> Andrew (13)
> First year, Business
> Q-Step student

> When I enrolled, because I was straight out of school, I filled out all the application forms for my subjects, and I just sort of turned up. Like, they really didn't give me an acceptance until a month later. So I just turned up saying, you know, 'I'm just going to these subjects. I don't know whether I'm supposed to be here or not'.
> Michelle (20)
> Continuing, Management

> I got one form [enrolment form], and it had the subjects I was doing which was correct and it says, if it's correct don't send it back, if it's wrong send it back. It was correct, but then, I never got any information about the HECS or anything so I went in and just filled out a form just in case and sent it in. Just a week ago I got a HECS form back saying I was enrolled just for chemistry—I didn't have the other two subjects on and I haven't gone in to find out about that yet. So I've got to go in and find out about that as well. When I got my enrolment paper it said I was doing three subjects and I was enrolled in all three but the HECS form says I'm doing one subject and I want to know, where's the other two?
> Jason (23)
> Continuing, Science
> ATSI student

> I got this great big packet of information about the university and all that, and I looked through it and I thought, 'Yeah, this is great. I don't need to worry about any of this'. I looked through it again and I found my enrolment form and it was supposed to be in a week ago.
> David (16)
> Continuing, Arts/Education

As expressed above, the untimeliness of enrolment information causes hassles for students (13,16,20,23), as does the lack of accurate feedback on their completed enrolment.

> [A friend of mine], he put in an enrolment to change subjects at the start of the semester. He just got the reply two weeks ago to say he is rejected. So he has to study the subject that he has not attended classes for during the past six weeks.
> Jeffrey (4)
> Continuing, Engineering
> Fee-paying overseas student

Students also complain of the enrolment section losing their forms and then charging them a late fee (10).

> I had a problem where they sent back my change of enrolment form which I posted a week early....So they sent it back saying, 'You haven't got all this authorisation for change of subjects and [haven't] paid your $20.00' and all this. I hadn't sent it in late. Ended up my course coordinator said, 'Just pay the $20.00 and argue about it later, or this time next year it still won't be fixed'.
> Paula (10)
> Continuing, Information Management
> Part-time student

Students also feel that they have inadequate information about the units themselves at the time of enrolment (8,11,18). Many feel that unit outlines would help (10,20). For some students, attending the first lecture of a smorgasbord of units and then selecting the ones they will stay in seems their best option under the circumstances (8,18).

> I go to the first lecture of about four or five subjects at the beginning of the semester to find out what the subject's like. Because you get a synopsis of the subject which is about five or ten lines about the subject, and you've actually got no idea what that subject is about. And until you go to the first lecture and you get the course outline, you've got no idea.
> Neil (8)
> First year, Education
> Part-time student

> It's pretty hard to choose a subject just by the name.
> Tim (18)
> First year, Civil Engineering

> A number of students...go to a subject and then go to another subject, and another one, they might go to four, and they'll only pick one.
> Mark (8)
> Continuing, Data Communications
> Part-time student

Students like Mark above feel the need for more timely information about units and courses (1,10,16,1920,24), credit procedures (1,20), and changes in courses and units (6,20,21).

> It was very confusing. They'd actually changed the course codes so some of the sheets had a different course code on them. That was confusing for me because I changed into the subject at the beginning of the year, and I'd rung up for the course code and I was given the wrong course code. So, half way through the semester I realised that none of these codes correspond: not one they had given me, not the one they had on the new material, not the one on the old material. Then I looked into it further and said, 'I think I'm doing the wrong subject'. And I had to pay $20.00.
> Kathy (14)
> Final year, Nursing

Students also feel that the information should be available from one source, rather than being put through from person to person (14,19,20) or given wrong information (13,14).

Timetabling

Students feel that a coordinated administration is one which could provide them with accurate timetable information before they enrolled (1,6,7,11,14,15,17,18,20,24) so that they could plan their schedule early and have some assurance that it would not change at the last minute.

> I have a constant gripe about timetables. Every semester I spend days trying to work out four subjects to fit into a week where I have no clashes...One of my friends refused to come to QUT because they can't timetable.
> Cheryl (16)
> Continuing, Education

Students report that changes made to timetables at the beginning of the semester are confusing and inconvenient (3,4,10,11,15,16,17,20). Those who work either full- or part-time find the changes very disruptive, as they have difficulty organising their work shifts and time off around a changing timetable (8,15) (part-time students find the exam timetable poses a similar problem (13,24)). When the timetable is changed, unit clashes result and students are not informed about any changes that are made (4,11). At times, students turn up for a unit only to find that it has been moved to another day and/or time (10). This appears to be especially vexatious for part-time students who need to find time to travel to QUT in order to check whether their timetable has changed or not (10).

> When you rush down from work [at lunchtime] and it's been on the board that [your subject] is being offered...but when you get there at 6 o'clock, 'Oh, the subject is no longer being offered'.
> Paula (10)
> Continuing, Information Management
> Part-time student

Students are also dissatisfied when timetabling results in lectures and tutorials being separated by three or more hours, and/or when they have to come in three to five days a week for only a few hours at a time (2,7,8,9,18).

> I was so excited when I finally worked out the timetable—that I only had to come on Wednesdays and Thursdays—and then felt a little bit devastated when I didn't have much choice because of the tutorials. The tutorials were just all over the place: they put me in tutorials that clashed with other subjects and as a result one night at 8 o' clock I was wandering around this [Gardens Point] campus looking for a computer lab that was actually at Carseldine—which I found out the next day.
> Kim (16)
> First year, Business

As one might expect, the students who seem to be the most inconvenienced by this are those who travel long distances to come to university each day (2,18).

Part-time students often find lecture and tutorial times a problem. Examples include units that are only offered during the day which means that part-time students can often not attend and so have to change units, resulting in other difficulties, such as being out of sync with their course.

> I had a lot of problems because the course had changed, all the subjects had changed, and I had to select subjects. I'm doing the subjects out of sync now....I don't know what subjects I'm going to do until the timetable comes out. I've got three electives to choose, but these three electives will probably be all on Tuesday night, and the other subjects—I've got a prerequisite to do before I can do them.
> Paul (8)
> Final year, Accounting
> Part-time student

Multi-campus students expressed concerns with having to attend lectures and/or tutorials at more than one campus in the same day (usually Kelvin Grove and Gardens Point) due to timetabling. Difficulties arise when students have only a short space of time (e.g., one hour) to travel between campuses.

> Once I had a lecture here [Gardens Point] that finished at 12:00 and I had a lecture at Carseldine that started at 2:00. To get there I had to rush off to get the bus from here to the city, and from the city catch a bus to make the lecture on time. I didn't have time to eat.
> Angeline (14)
> Final year, Education
> Fee-paying overseas student

Associated problems of overcrowded buses and a lack of understanding by lecturers surface here.

Access to Lectures/Tutorials

Students also report that their lecture rooms are seriously overcrowded at the beginning of semester (1,3,5,7,8,10,11,17). They tend to suspect that this inability to predict and plan for the number of students in classes is the result of confusions surrounding enrolments, class conflicts due to timetable changes, and the number of students still 'shopping' for units.

> When we first went to one of our lectures, we were in the room, not the theatre. We were told if we weren't comfortable in there, we could leave. Because of the number of people [it] was a fire hazard, and illegal. And if none of us were comfortable, we could leave. And a little bit later in that lecture...they told us then that the lecture was being changed to Wednesday afternoon because of a clash in times or something like that....One of the people in the class put up their hand and said, 'But that clashes with one of my subjects and they said, 'Oh! Oh! We didn't realise that. What subject is that?' And that's just bad organisation. They just didn't check, didn't bother!
> Lisa (17)
> First year, Business

Students do not usually blame the lecturer for the overcrowding, as they usually expect that he/she is as much in the dark as they are (2,4,13).

> There should be better organisational skills within the administration, as the lecturers do not know who is actually enrolled in the subjects until halfway through the semester.
> Adam (13)
> Continuing, Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Surveying
> Q-Step student

> [There] needs to be more communication between enrolments and the faculties. Often lecturers don't have any idea of how many students are enrolled: there are no seats, there is no coordination, and the lecturers are not competent to handle the situation.
> Kristen (2)
> Continuing, Business/Law

However, students object to the ways that some lecturers attempt to recover from these problems.

> There's like forty of us. The lecturer comes in and says, 'I'm supposed to have 20 people so I'm going to go out, and when I come in I want 20 of you out. I don't want to see you here at all'.
> Nicole (15)
> Continuing, Social Science
> Part-time student

In one case, students reported that the lecturer called security to clear the room of unwanted extra students (21). Another memorable example of poor service recovery for students is the way lecturers allocate tutorials in some large classes by merely inciting hundreds of students to physically compete for a slot in preferred tutorials by charging to the front of the room to put down their names (3,8,11,13,15,21). Not surprisingly, this practice is seen by students as not only poor service, but thoughtlessly poor service.

> There was this big rush to the front 'cause we were told before it was competitive for tutorials. Everyone was rushing in the front to put their names on the list and I just thought, 'God, it's just like a lot of bloody sheep. It could be done more professional.'
> Pauline (11)
> First year, Humanities

> In a lecture for our tutorial times they just put five sheets of paper on the desk. And there were 500 people in the classroom. And they said, 'Come up and sign your name'. It just turned into a big cat fight and everyone was trying to write on a pieces of paper. And some people just missed out. They have to go on different days which is inconvenient. In other subjects you put three preferences. But in this one, they made you fight for it.
> Daniel (3)
> First year, Business

> They actually just stick up the hours up on a board and it is an absolute bun fight to get in and get your name down for a tutorial that suits you, especially when you're a part-time student because you're so limited—so I had to literally run over people. And there was one poor mother there who had her child with her—you can imagine there must have been 120 people in a room this size [10x10 meters] trying to get to these boards—and her baby was just absolutely screaming because it was so frantic in there.
> Deborah (8)
> First year, Social Science
> Part-time student

Practices such as these reinforce the impression of disorganisation and lack of regard to students by compounding one inconvenience (large, overcrowded lecture rooms) with insensitive service recovery (ordering surplus students out of the room—to where? or inciting them to fight among themselves for a space in tutorials).

Access to Texts and Materials

Another obstacle for students in the early weeks of the semester is access to required texts and subject readings (2,3,5,7,8,10,11,13,14,15,16,17,19,21,22). Students complain of insufficient numbers of texts in the bookshops (8,11,13,14,15,17,19,21,22), of their lack of availability early in the semester (2,3,7,10,11,15,16,17), and/or their availability on the student's campus (2,10).

> If QUT requires you to access a particular book or material, they need to make sure that it's accessible.
> Andrew (2)
> Continuing, Justice Studies
> Part-time ATSI student

Some textbooks are coming into the bookshop halfway through the semester.
Elisha (3)
First year, Business

KG bookshop usually only has a fraction of the books you need.
Jessica (10)
Continuing, Education

Sometimes it's 6 to 8 weeks before you can get a textbook.
Vikki (21)
First year, Marketing
Fee-paying overseas student

Students fall behind because they can't get the books.
Allison (22)
Continuing, Education
ATSI student

Students also wish they were alerted to needed texts earlier so that they could either avoid the rush or do their reading early.

> How come we can't get textbook lists? Why can't you get a week in advance to know what your textbooks are so that we can do some pre-reading? The first 2 weeks of the semester are stuffed with this sort of thing, and everyone running around saying, 'Aaarrrgh' trying to find textbooks....Why can't we get them the week before? Why are they madly printing them up a day before the lecture starts?
> Jessica (10)
> Continuing, Education

Part-time students are especially inconvenienced in this regard given their limited ability to come to campus during the day (2,3,7,8,19). (Issues involving price of texts and bookshop hours will be discussed under quality disappointments.) As well as having difficulties accessing textbooks, students also experience difficulties accessing the proper material through the library and LAC (2,4,8,14,15,23) early in the semester. Problems include a delay between when the lecturer places material on LAC and when the students can actually retrieve it (8), LAC materials only being available at a different library than where the students takes units (22), and the general lack of sufficient materials in the library (2) (other library issues are discussed under access to resources).

The Enrolment Cascade

While students often cite problems with enrolments, timetabling, overcrowded lecture rooms, and insufficient texts as independent evidence that QUT administration is confused and not student-centred, and while students (and service providers themselves) may see disaffection at a site as *their* problem, the team (and some participants) suspected that the `big picture' lay beyond the boundary of any one service area. It appeared that there were multiple forces at work in the beginning of the semester, and that one problem cascaded into another. That is, an initial problem metastases into another area and then another, creating an ongoing cycle of problems for students. The team decided to call this phenomena the 'enrolment cascade'.

Being students themselves, the team was able to use the evidence discussed above to fill in the missing pieces that describe the dynamics of the enrolment cascade. The problem starts with students being required to enrol for subjects without knowing the time a subject will be offered, if it will be offered, and without the benefit of a unit outline or other information.

If the student attempts to comply with the stated enrolment procedures in good faith, he or she is faced with several obstacles. The student is first faced with the untimeliness of information and delays in processing, coupled with the fact that their enrolment forms are sometimes lost or recorded inaccurately. The second is a late-arriving and constantly changing timetable, which can change unpredictably until the day of the class (and/or during the first class period). When the timetable does come out, the student often finds that one or more of his/her classes have time clashes or involve impossible logistical demands, but does not know whether the changes he/she then makes will be nullified by further timetable changes.

A delayed answer to an application for credit may further upset his/her plans. As a result, students attempt to partially transcend these problems by becoming 'enlightened users' of these services: ones who 'know' that the real enrolment occurs during the first weeks of classes e.g., 'I do it every semester, I wouldn't have a clue what subjects I'm doing next year until I see the timetable' (Deborah, (8)).

This means that enrolment information is unrealistic, given that students sign up for units they never intend to take, attend lectures to which they are not enrolled during their 'shopping spree', and/or eventually return to the unit in which they are initially enrolled after sampling other alternatives. The lack of good enrolment data early makes it impossible to schedule enough classroom space to meet the unpredictable and shifting demand, and since students cannot elect a tutorial time when they enrol, lecturers relegate their obligation of rationalising tutorials by having the students compete physically with each other for the available spaces. Under these uncertain conditions, accurate numbers of texts and LAC or other readings cannot be measured early enough to provide adequate numbers early in the semester. The end result of these cascading problems is that many students are not settled in their courses and in possession of all their materials until well into the semester.

Theme 2: Balkanisation of Information and Procedures

Coupled with issues of administrative confusion is the student perception that needed information is fragmented, or 'Balkanised', into many separate departments (19,23).

> ...The information was there, but you didn't know where to go or how to find the information. For example, there is an O week, but you're not really told there is an O week happening, or where to go or who to see. But the information is there. For example, to find out what order to do your subjects you can go and see your lecturers, but no one tells you you can go to see lecturers to find out that information.
> Paul (8)
> Final year, Accounting
> Part-time student

The student finds needed information in bits and pieces, and needs help to find out how to find out (11,16).

> QUT does not give you comprehensive information. They give you bits and pieces. In our case, international students, new country, new culture, you must have more information as you settle down.
> Jeffrey (4)
> Engineering
> Fee-paying overseas student

> I mean you can't be expected to be hand-fed everything, so as a student you have to take on certain responsibilities, and it's up to you to find out certain things. But you know, you don't have to, it should be made easier so that you don't have to exhaust yourself.
> Kate (12)
> First year, Humanities

The result of this Balkanisation is a perceived 'information vacuum' for students.

> When I first got here, there was a lack of information in the air.
> Ben (3)
> First year, Arts

At other times, needed information does not cross between Balkan states in a timely way.

> On my timetable [Science], we actually do one computing subject which is in the Business faculty. And the Business faculty changed the times of the computing subject but it wasn't recorded in the science faculty, so the times of the lecture, and the place of the lecture, was changed. Everything was changed. It was the first Monday back at uni. It's like, 'God, this shouldn't happen'. So I missed my first lecture.
> Sharon (3)
> First year, Science

Students also complain about the clarity of the information that they do receive. As discussed above under enrolments, students feel that information is often untimely and unclear.

> I remember I went to get my timetable and I couldn't understand it...there were five different times for lectures and I thought I had to go to all of them, and I was stressing out.
> Cheryl (16)
> Continuing, Education

As regards timetables discussed above, students also noted that they were difficult to access and retrieve information from. As a general rule, QUT needs to let students know more about the units they are offering, offer more information on basic course structures (19), and provide relevant information on such issues as course changes without the student having to seek it out or depend on word-of-mouth from other students (1,6,20,24). Students note that their lecturers are often too busy to supply basic information.

> They [lecturers] give you phone numbers, but you have trouble getting on to somebody, and then, because they're busy, when you do get on to somebody, you feel that they've got other things to do, that you're just one student out of so many hundreds of students.
> Wendy (20)
> First year, Social Science

One area of weakness for students is orientation. They feel that orientation should inform students rather than discuss issues such as plagiarism; students also feel that appropriate class behaviour should be explained during orientation (4,11,16).

> I felt they really threw us in the deep end, especially coming straight from school.
> Nathan (22)
> Continuing, Business/Law
> ATSI student

> I thought that orientation was not done well at all, particularly for us who haven't been at school for about twenty years. I felt left in the dark....I expected a lot more input and a lot more information. Like, 'This is where you'll go to get that and this is where you'll go get that and this is where you'll go to get help for this'. But there was nothing.
> Kathy (14)
> Final year, Nursing
> Part-time student

> The first exam I did, it was a multiple-choice one, and I didn't have any idea what all the dots were for your name. I felt really dumb when I realised, but for the first exam, I didn't do it. See, nobody had said anything, they just said write your name. So I wrote my name, and just looked at all the dots and thought, 'That's interesting'.
> Wendy (20)
> First year, Social Science

First year students felt the need for such simple information as where to go (18), how to sign up for tutorials (18,22), and how to use the library facilities (18). This basic information is especially needed by part-time students (24), given that orientation is inconvenient for them to attend and there is no after-hours induction program (8), coupled with the problem of quickly finding what they need in their limited hours on campus.

> First of all, you don't know where to go to find all of these things. Second, you've got this great time constraint crushing down on you. And it takes a little time to explore. And if the university could in some way make that process a little bit easier [for part-time students], that goes a long way toward making happier and more productive students.
> Mark (8)
> Continuing, Data Communications

As the situation now stands, part-timers need to rely on full-time students or more seasoned part-timers for much of their needed information (8).

Students also perceive that information about services and recreation is not well organised (1,18,19,23). As a result, they only find out about a service or an event by accident, or when it is already over (23).

> When you are here, you don't hear....When you want to find out about the services, you don't hear anything and you don't know how to get involved or you don't know that there is anything to get involved in.
> Kevin (18)
> Continuing, Information Systems

Participants felt that access to student service information could be easier (3) and more timely (15,23). Notices are not posted prominently enough and the student diary published by the Guild suffers from its own information and availability problems (23). As a result, students learn of services and events in an *ad hoc* and accidental way.

Discussing why Bruno missed the swimming carnival, the following dialogue took place:

Samantha: I think it's in the diary, isn't it?

Bruno: There is a diary?

Samantha: They don't send it to you. You have to go and get it. I know that because I used to work with a girl and she told me that 'The diaries come out tomorrow'. And she got me one and I thought that was interesting.

Lan: They should advertise their extracurricular and club activities more. Because I picked up the 'Inside QUT' for one of the first times. And there's all these different clubs I didn't know about, like rock climbing and touch football and basketball. If I knew that a couple of years ago, I probably would have had a better time.

Bruno: Inside QUT is good for finding out what you missed!

Lan: The diary would be good if it had everything in it, and if it was actually made more available, rather than distributed in a[n] hour time slot where if you're there, good on ya, you got one.

Samantha (23)

First year, Nursing

Bruno (23)

Continuing, Construction Management

Lan (23)

Final year, Information Systems

In short, students feel that needed information is both in short supply and hidden away in Balkanised departments for which they lack an overall roadmap.

Theme 3: Access to Resources

Although students appreciate campus resources such as computer services and the library, student expectations for these resources left many dissatisfied with access.

Computer Access

Access to computers and technology at QUT[19] is seen as restricted in a number of ways: resource limitations (1,5,6,7,13,15,19,22), crowded facilities (18,19) especially during peak times, computers and printers which are often 'down' (2,4,7,13,15,17,19), and limited dial-in access (3,4,6,11,15,19). Students describe having to queue for facilities and using laser printers late at night to avoid overcrowding.

> We have one Macload that is like for 80 people, like to do graphic work on. And that is basically all the work we do.
> Sharon (13)
> First year, Arts Academy
> Q-Step student

> You spend half an hour to come in here and then the machines are so busy and the only machines that are available are the ones that are really shitty and nobody really wants to work with. You can report it but it takes a couple of weeks before they can get somebody in....Because the machines are used so much, they fail quite often.
> Danny (19)
> Final year, Information Systems
> Part-time student

[19] By QUT is meant all campuses, Gardens Point, Kelvin Grove, and Carseldine.

> There are only two printers at Carseldine and they were both out one day.
> Lynn (13)
> Final year, Social Science
> Q-Step student

Students consider it unfair that their access to dial-in facilities is being restricted, and often consider it a broken promise.

> Before we enrolled, a lot of us went to these little lectures that you could turn up and they'd explain the course that you were thinking about enrolling in. And one of the big things that they talked about was this thing called 'dial-in access' which is where if you've got a PC at home and a modem you can dial in and get access to lecture notes and the systems. When we all turned up here after we enrolled, they ended up telling us it's not available. And for part-time students it's ah...well a big disappointment. Because a lot of part-timers can't get here every week....One of the reasons I came here rather than UQ was because I had this dial-in access facility because I can't get here for all my lectures. You've got to try to catch up somehow.
> Chris (3)
> First year, Information Technology
> Part-time student

One vision impaired student reported that only an administrative error prevented his dial-in access from being revoked.

> I use dial-in access and they're limiting that now. I use that a lot because it's easier for me because I'm vision impaired [and] I can use it at home. I can dial in to the library before I go in, so I know that the books will be there and I can go straight to them. But they are limiting that now....I was lucky to get it this year because I had it last year and my account wasn't deleted.
> Craig (15)
> Continuing, Data Communications
> Student with disability

Students' access to technology at QUT is also limited by the lack of information and advice available on how to use equipment, software, and e-mail. Students commented that they did not know where to access information on how to use computers, and that laboratory technicians are also difficult to access (2,5,13,17,21,23). Restricted access to technology—computers, printers, e-mail, and the internet—provoked one wag to comment:

> It's [QUT] not living up to the T in QUT.
> Jeffrey (4)
> Continuing, Engineering
> Fee-paying overseas student

Library Access

Although pleased with the services offered at all branches of the QUT library, students are concerned with the availability of materials (2,9,10,15,16,19,21,24), especially during peak times.

> Library processing is pretty abysmal....It makes it very hard because if you're using a catalogue trying to find books a day or two before an assignment's due and they're just not there, you have to go somewhere else.
> Matthew (14)
> Final year, Education

Students report using the UQ library as their first port-of-call for materials given their experiences with QUT (2,5,14,16,21).

> I've given up on the library here....If you go to UQ, they always have the books...They have two copies of most good texts.
> Raoul (15)
> First year, Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Surveying
> Part-time student with disability

> I find I use UQ's library all the time. I never use QUT's library....I find that I can never find what I'm looking for here.
> Kimberley (5)
> Final year, Business

> On the face of it they'll spend three million dollars advertising in one week to get students, but they won't buy a book for the library.
> Gary (15)
> Final year, Human Resource Management
> Student with disability

Additional problems include books not being available on the campus at which the lectures are held (15,22), the number of books hidden, stolen, or vandalised by (fellow) students (2,8,15,19), the slowness of catalogue systems (12,19), and the processing of materials from LAC (4,8,15,23).

> ...They'd [needed readings at Kelvin Grove LAC] been piling up at the back. They hadn't bothered to put it in the LAC. We'd lost about five weeks on the readings and getting prepared.
> Neil (8)
> First year, Education
> Part-time student

Part-time Access

Part-time students commented that they do not have the same opportunities for access as full-time students, and that QUT services are not structured to meet their needs (8). Access to lecturers and tutors is curtailed, the bookshop hours make it difficult for them to get texts, and parking makes coming from work to a night lecture difficult. They also note that most routine tasks require them to take time off work, as administrative staff are not available during their class time, and alternative systems are not available.

Theme 4: Parking and Transport

Parking and transport issues came up frequently in the groups. It comes as no surprise that students consider difficulties with parking on the Gardens Point and Kelvin Grove campuses a salient issue (2,4,7,8,9,10,11,14,18,23,24). Students report that there are not enough parking spaces (1,7,10,12,19,22,23) and that the price of parking is too high (7,10,11,12,18,21). Students report that the parking situation is more than an inconvenience; it limits their access to campus resources, makes it difficult to schedule activities, wastes much precious time (especially for part-time students), and distracts them from their educational goals.

> It's always a mad rush to find a parking place. If you don't find one you are late for lectures....When you finally get to the lectures you feel all frustrated.
> Ian (1)
> Final year, Marketing

> Probably one of my biggest problems is parking. It just means no matter how well I organise myself, it all falls to bits....Sometimes the carpark isn't full, they just put the sign up and then close it off, maybe so they don't have to have someone sitting there.
> Andrew (7)
> Continuing, Law

> I gave up on parking and now I catch a train in, but this is a hassle because I have to drive my car home after work and then catch a train back in, and that's just too rushed in the afternoon.
> Colin (19)
> First year, Business

Finding a carpark at QUT's Gardens Point campus is a time-consuming and frustrating activity (10). Parking difficulties make students late for class (1,7) and they sometimes have to leave early to feed their meters or repark their cars because of parking limitations (10). Students report having to walk long distances from their cars to campus (23) or even bring their bikes in their cars to speed the trip from their parking places to campus (10).

Students are further frustrated by the perception that parking spaces do not seem to be allocated fairly (2,13); for example, spaces under Z Block and ITE are vacant while students cannot find parks (19), and the sign on the carpark under the freeway reads full when it appears that there are spaces remaining (7). Also, if a large event is taking place in the Botanic Gardens, all of QUT's parking spaces are full, and students are unable to get parks (2).

Students report that the limited number of parking spaces at Kelvin Grove means that students spend a lot of time looking for parks (10,19), and sometimes go home again instead of attending their lectures (16). Kelvin Grove parking is made a hassle by the inadequate number of spaces (10,12), the hills (19), the difficulty of obtaining a parking permit (9,19), and tickets and fines (22).

> Sometimes I've just gone away... and not attended lectures because I can't find a park.
> Susan (16)
> Continuing, Arts Academy

> At Kelvin Grove, that's where I go, it is a complete nightmare. You can never get a parking permit, and then when you do have a parking permit, you can't squish into the little section where you're meant to park. If you don't have a parking permit you have to trek up these hills all over the place. It is a real nightmare.
> Carolyn (19)
> Final year, Public Health
> Part-time student

Transport issues make travel from home and intercampus travel problematic for many students. Students remark that intercampus bus travel leaves insufficient time to get from one lecture to another (1,3,4,6,9,14,16,21), and that buses and trains are often unreliable (10,11,21). Many students commented on the absence of a shuttle bus for students between campuses (4,9,10,12,14,14,15,16,16,17,24). This lack is highlighted by QUT's intercampus bus for staff, a facility that students cannot use (16).

> There's a lovely, cute, little bus with 'students do not touch'.
> Kim (16)
> First year, Business

Students also remarked on the cost of transport to and around QUT, and the fact there are no concession fares on buses (1,3,5,7,9,11,13,16,17,18,19). Many remarked that the Kelvin Grove bus service is overcrowded (1,3,4,6,21) and does not run frequently enough. Bus transport after night lectures poses extra problems for students, as they are forced to leave their lectures early to catch the bus (9,19), and/or feel unsafe waiting for the bus late at night (6,9,10). The time it takes to travel by bus also discourages students (2,5,9,10).

Theme 5: Quality Disappointments

Quality disappointment involve those areas where QUT's performance does not meet students expectations, but are not enmeshed in any more systematic issues. Students are not so much vexed or blocked by these issues as disappointed. Under this heading comes their experiences with rude or thoughtless staff, a lack of professionalism in a service, prices and quality in the refectory or bookshop, and the amorphous issue of QUT's overall identity and feel to students. Each will be dealt with in turn.

Staff Attitudes

Students perceive that their major obstacles are caused by the bureaucratic systems and structures of QUT or a lack of resources, and perceive staff at best as pleasant and helpful, or at worst, as fellow 'prisoners of the system'. However, just as positive attitudes make a vivid impression on students, staff attitudes, when rude, insensitive, or negative, make a memorable impression as well. Students remarked on the apparent unwillingness to help of Gardens Point and Kelvin Grove library personnel (while admitting they were understaffed) (14,16,17,19). Some students also remarked at the rudeness of other administrative personnel.[20]

Students also seemed to notice a lack of customer service orientation when speaking of their negative experiences with QUT staff, especially by part-time students with work experience (8).

From the transcripts, it is apparent that the 'rudeness' students experience is better termed as lack of empathy for the students' position. That is, academic or general staff who are not helpful, or ignore the student's stress or urgency, are perceive as 'rude'.

> You try to find a single person at Gardens Point library; it's like, 'Coo-ee, coo-ee, I need some help goddamit'.
> Kim (16)
> First year, Business

> The librarians at GP are vicious.
> Nicole (17)
> Continuing, Arts/Law

[20] It must be remembered that students see all staff in non-teaching roles as "administrators," and see such issues as allocation of tutorials, though done by academics, as "administrative" successes or failures.

Whether or not one believes that the librarians are 'vicious', this impression is evidence of a reciprocal pattern of service failure, an enduring *folie a deux* between staff and student, that results in the staff being seen as vicious. That is, a period of unreliable service simultaneously raises students expectations for service recovery as it diverts staff energies into fixing the problem. When the harried staff member faces a frustrated customer, it is only too human for each to see the other (and their inappropriate attitudes), rather than the system which has failed them, as the source of their troubles.

Bookshop

Although students appreciate the QUT bookshops, they are disappointed by book prices (2,3,5,7,9,11,15,16,17,18,21) and with the bookshop not catering to part-time students' needs because of its opening hours (2,3,7,19,24).

> I can buy some books from Herston Bookshop, they're usually $6-$20 cheaper than at QUT....[the] bookshop should be non-profit or at least subsidised.
> Fiona (21)
> Continuing, Health/Education

> I use my lunch hour to get down here....If I'm busy during my lunch hour then there's no hope in hell [e.g., lines and crowds early in the semester].
> Danny (19)
> Final year, Information Systems
> Part-time student

Participants also complained about the lack of a 'cash-out'/EFTPOS facility and of insufficient staffing at the bookshop (2,7,10,17).

Refectories

Students are generally disappointed with the refectories. The main issue is the expense of the food (4,5,9,10,12,13,14,16,17,18,19,21), which is generally perceived to be overpriced for its quality. Students are also disappointed by the lack of variety in a refectory's offerings (4,12,24) and the perceived lack of fresh and nutritional foods (10,12,14,16,19). Unaccommodating opening hours were of particular concern to part-time students who attended night lectures (4,12,13,19). The most noteworthy positive aspect of the refectory was that the sandwich bars provided a healthy, fresh, alternative (although still criticised for its expensive prices) (14,16,21).

Aesthetics and Identity

Although many students think that QUT's location is one of its strengths, students are disappointed with the layout and aesthetics of the Gardens Point campus (and other campuses). Some students find the architecture of the Gardens Point campus oppressive, intimidating, daunting, big, disorganised, and in the words of one student, 'cold, bleak, and ugh'(1,4,5,11).

> I was actually disappointed....From the looks of things it didn't look like a university to me.
> Ian (1)
> Final year, Marketing

Some students believe that the separation of campuses creates a fragmented identity, without spirit or unity (2,5,6,10,23), while others note that the commuter atmosphere of QUT both creates and reinforces a limited campus life.

> [My typical day is that] I try to come and go as quickly as possible. It doesn't really feel like a university.
> Martin (10)
> Continuing, Construction Management
> Part-time student

> Sometimes I feel like I don't belong to a university, but rather, I seem to come along to these buildings and go to a lecture and you get that over and done with. There's no sense of institution to which I belong to. There's no sense of identity.
> Jim (10)
> Continuing, Law

> When I look at the universities from America, I feel envious because they're so proud of their university. I mean, it's not like QUT versus UQ here. We don't really have that much interaction. But at UQ I see people wearing baseball caps very proudly. I'm missing that. We don't really have camaraderie in QUT.
> Lan (23)
> Final year, Information Systems

The atmosphere of the Carseldine campus, although quiet and helpful, was disappointing for many students, given its isolation and relative lack of campus resources and diversions.

> When I got to Carseldine there was nobody there. Tumbleweeds were blowing! I thought, 'Geez, this is a bit disappointing'.
> Stephen (21)
> Final year, Social Science
> ATSI student

These students often remark on the lack of resources on their campus and the inequitable allocation of Guild-related resources, such as recreational facilities. Likewise, the distances between campuses of the university is seen as a problem; in particular, the distance between Carseldine and Gardens Point (13,14,17,21). The Carseldine campus in itself is seen as being under-equipped by way of resources/services and neglected (13,14,17,21).

Theme 6: Student Guild Issues

The performance of the Student Guild emerged as an important issue for participants in many groups (1,2,3,6,10,11,12,13,14,17,18,19,21,22,23). Some students—primarily first year students—do not know what the Guild is (17,21). It is their general feeling that they know too little about how the Guild is operating and spending their money (Guild fees) (1,3,6,10,11,13,14,17,18,19,21,22,23), or how well the Guild is representing the interests of the student body (2,10,17,18,19,22). Many students do not know what the Guild does (12,23), and/or would like to have open meetings where they might influence the activities that the Guild conducts (2).

> These people don't seem really interested in meeting the needs of the students and serving the student body. It's like a stepping stone in their own little political career.
> Jessica (10)
> Continuing, Education

> Many students object to the Guild's anti-liberal campaign and especially their spending of student funds to mount such a campaign. The student Guild can go and vote for whoever they want, and they have no right to inform or try to sway someone to vote for anybody else.
> Katherine (12)
> First year, Science

> I have no problem with them representing me like as into Vice-Chancellors and all that sort of thing, Austudy, Abstudy, whatever. But I just think when they start getting political, it's uncalled for; I think that's not their role, their position.
> Allison (22)
> Continuing, Education
> ATSI student

The general lack of information about what the Guild does with its funds, coupled with its overt politicising during the recent federal election, is a major source of anger and concern to students. Most students want to know what their Guild fees are paying for (1,6,10,11,12,13,17,19,21,23).

> Where does the Guild money go? I don't know where it goes. We got to wonder where our Guild fees are going....Like, what do we get?...Like a silly diary?
> Simone (17)
> First year, Arts/Education

> The fact that they don't volunteer information makes you wonder about it.
> Katherine (12)
> First year, Science

> As a member of the Guild, which I s'pose you are, you are entitled to a run-down of what they spend their money on.
> Tiffany (2)
> Continuing, Health

> It seems to be the minorities running the majority....Where's the majority voice?
> Kevin (18)
> Continuing, Information Systems

This lack of access, lack of knowledge about activities and finances coupled with an overt political stance that students think is outside of the Guild's purview, presents major public relations problems for the QUT Student Guild.

Student Impressions in a Service Focus: Using this Data to Improve QUT Services

The major findings of the Student Focus project indicate that students appreciate QUT's location, practical ethos, and orientation towards improvement, but are frustrated by its overgrown bureaucracy and fragmented delivery of information, as well as by its failure to provide needed resources.

Each of the positive and negative themes discussed in this report point to areas of high leverage for improving QUT service to students. By 'leverage' is meant areas where relatively small changes in structures, procedures, or attitude can have a proportionately large impact on perceptions of service.[21]

Some areas of high leverage involve changing expectations (e.g., parking, computer access). Others involve improving the reliability of service delivery or amending systems which are prone to service failure and/or failures in service recovery (e.g., the enrolment cascade).

As discussed in a previous section, providing quality service is a function of managing **expectations** and providing the expected outcome in a **reliable**, **responsive** and **empathetic** way. Reliability, although more difficult to achieve, may be more appreciated than responsiveness. Good service providers also realise that providing **value** for their client or customer does not always mean providing the cheapest service possible.

To fully capitalise on the leverage revealed in the Student Focus project, QUT must give attention to the ways it manages student expectations, fix systems which do not deliver reliable service, and capitalise on ways of enhancing value for students. Some suggested directions are discussed briefly.

[21] To use a contrasting hypothetical example, to build a multi-million dollar carpark that would reduce QUT's parking problem by a small percentage would be a solution with relatively low leverage in terms of perceived quality of service.

Managing Expectations

An obscure proverb states, 'in darkness, the ceiling is always higher'. One way of improving perceptions of quality service is by managing students' expectations for service. This means fostering an information climate that neither stonewalls nor oversells, but educates the client in the requirements of good service in this context. As Heskett, et al has observed, people expect more responsive service from Federal Express than they do from their family physician, since the latter has carefully educated his or her clients in the special requirements of good care in such a setting.

Education in realistic service expectations is also based on a clearly articulated *quid pro quo* , which highlights what is required of each party if good service is to be achieved. For example, Federal Express does not guarantee that any package, of any size, picked up at any time, will be delivered the next day; however, *if the customer lives up to their part in the exchange* (which is clearly articulated beforehand), Federal Express promises to deliver reliable outcomes. Managed expectations is not an excuse for retaining baroque service delivery systems, but helps the client mesh most effectively with the system, becoming a partner in achieving good outcomes.

For example, parking is an area where educating clients may pay dividends. Students appreciate the urban location of QUT, but often do not appreciate that this benefit involves a trade-off in terms of convenient parking. Clearly articulating the benefits of this trade-off, while highlighting what QUT is doing to minimise these drawbacks, moves QUT closer to the goal of lowering student expectations, while highlighting QUT's understanding of the problem and its commitment to continual improvement. Student comments indicate that QUT's current strategy neither adequately reinforces the benefits of its urban location nor signals its responsiveness to, or empathy with, the student's parking frustrations. Whatever can be done in this area to show special concern for part-time students will pay dividends in terms of changing perceptions of these students that they are 'second class citizens'.

To take another example, computing services, through their laudable efforts toward making computers more available on campus, may also be fostering service expectations which can never be realistically achieved. In the absence of strategically managed expectations for these services, Student Focus data indicates that students are beginning to see routine access to computers and printers on campus as part of QUT's obligation to them, rather than as convenience to use between classes or for making last-minute adjustments to their work.

One way of changing this perception might be to institute a system where students purchase computer equipment themselves, but benefit from QUT's exemption from sales tax. Such a system would provide a service more costly to students than the current one, but because of its increased benefits, be of higher value to them. If coupled with better dial-in access, this system might simultaneously eliminate the space and capital intensive burden of large computer centres and create a system that is better appreciated by students. QUT could then move toward a decentralised system where space and capital intensive computer centres are reduced to the role of special conveniences, while student access to information is enhanced.

The data above also highlights the dangers of overselling facilities before they can be reliably delivered. Dial-in access is one such instance, which students report was promised, partially delivered, but then withdrawn and given only to graduate students. Such a scenario creates a service expectation only to publicly fail both in terms of delivery and perceived equity.

The expectations of part-time students and Carseldine students also require more creative management. Both see themselves as not getting the services that full-time and/or Gardens Point students receive. While these perceptions may have some basis in fact, this does not prevent QUT from accurately balancing the inconveniences of part-time or Carseldine study with its advantages.

Liberating Staff Energy Through Better Service

Another way of enhancing perceptions of service is to address the ways that current systems and structures create patterns of service failure, such as the enrolment cascade and poor information delivery. The challenge of such changes are to see current failures as systematic rather than as the responsibility of a particular area, even when the problem resides in that area *for a particular period in time*. For example, although students complain that the bookshop fails to provide their texts in time, there is little that the bookshop can do by itself to amend this problem, since the logic of the enrolment cascade suggests that it is the enrolment + timetabling + last-minute course change + bookshop *system* which actually fails them. The Balkanisation of needed information is, by definition, a problem whose solution lies outside of any one department.

Another challenge will be to identify areas where malignantly bureaucratic solutions themselves have become part of the problem, so as not to counter malignant bureaucracy with more bureaucracy. Just as one early disciple of Freud defined psychoanalysis as 'the disease of whose cure it is', the bureaucratic urge to continually attempt to create, in the words of T.S. Eliot, 'systems so perfect that no one will need to be good', tends to multiply barriers to action rather than facilitate prompt and reliable service delivery. As bureaucratic rules multiply, students increasingly perceive that the system is there to thwart them rather than to help them, and thereby compromises the efforts of staff to be responsive and empathic. The temptation is then to arrest the unhappy customer's range of action with further regulation or fines. In contrast, Student Focus data suggests that simplifying and streamlining bureaucratic procedures would remove most of the students' greatest barriers to good service.

Changing systems and structures that are prone to service failure is also indicated. For example, every service failure in the enrolment cascade impedes the predictability and reliability of key QUT service areas and delays the `actual' start of a student's semester by as much as several weeks. Each service failure also raises student expectations for service recovery, diverts staff energies into recovery procedures and the handling of disgruntled customers, and puts in motion an interpersonal *folie a deux* , which leaves both students and staff feeling put upon and powerless.

The challenge here will be to not mistake student service with service recovery. That is, attempting to solve system problems by merely increasing staff responsiveness will do nothing to fix the enrolment cascade or to revise the perceived quality of these services, since reliability, not responsiveness, is at the root of the original problem. In addition, service recovery is more costly in terms of effort, stress, and resources and rarely results in fully closing the gap between expectations and reality. Good service can therefore be measured by the absence of need for recovery efforts: not in how many phone calls are answered daily but in how many are prevented, not in the constant availability of staff but in the limited need for such availability. Good service delivery systems are identified not by harried workers, but by the equanimity necessary to providing excellent or breakthrough service.

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Details of Undergraduate Students Involved in the Student Focus Project

ADAM BELL is a final year Business student majoring in Organisational Communication. Career-oriented work experience has included client-based projects in communication technology and change management. Adam is currently employed as a marketing assistant at QUT's Academy of the Arts. Adam is interested in international relations and aspires to work overseas in the Asia-Pacific region.

LISA CORNES has completed a Bachelor of Business in Organisational Communication at QUT. Lisa's degree is her second qualification in Business, as she also has an Associate Diploma of Business (Management). Lisa has a significant amount of work experience, with her most relevant experience coming from her position as Assistant Consultant, with a public relations consultancy, and her position with the Human Resource Management Branch of the QLD Police Service. Lisa has a particular interest in communication technology, and would like a career in which she can use and develop her skills in this area.

FELICITY GRICE will be completing a Bachelor of Business in Organisational Communication at the end of 1996. In 1997, she intends to complete her Associate Diploma of Speech and Drama, Australia (ASDA). During her time at university, Felicity has taught speech and drama to children. She aims to combine her training in different forms of communication in her career.

CHRISTINA GRIFFITHS is a final year student in Organisational Communication at QUT. Christina has taken part in four client-based projects while studying, in areas including technology, organisational culture, and publicity. Christina is also studying a minor in Human Resource Management, and enjoys merging the different areas of organisational life. She would like a career which brings these different areas together, and is interested in working overseas.

JANE HEAD is completing a Bachelor of Business at QUT, majoring in Organisational Communication with a minor in Japanese. Jane also has an Associate Diploma of Business (Marketing), and Certificates in Tourism, and Art and Design. Jane has worked in the hospitality industry for the past seven years, and would enjoy a career in which she can blend her communication training, hospitality experience, art and design talents, and knowledge of Japanese.

VANESSA KHOO is an international student from Singapore, majoring in Organisational Communication, with a secondary major in Advertising. Vanessa has a significant amount of work experience in areas such as administration and advertising design. Vanessa is actively involved in the Singapore Students Association, and holds the position of Public Relations Officer. Vanessa is interested in consulting and copywriting, and would like to begin her career in Australia..

MATTHEW KIMBERLEY is currently completing his final year of a Bachelor of Business majoring in Organisational Communication. As well as studying his core subjects, he has taken photography, creative writing, and film narrative subjects in order to broaden the scope of his degree. Matthew hopes to pursue a career in the music industry, either with his own band or as a writer or manager.

MARK MOSS is a final year Organisational Communication with a minor in Public Relations. He has completed an Associate Diploma of Business (Management) and is currently employed with the ANZ Banking Corporation. Organisational culture, and external and internal communication strategies, are of particular interest to Mark.

KERRYN PEAKER is currently completing a Bachelor of Business in Organisational Communication at QUT. Kerryn has a wide variety of work experience, and has participated in several client-based projects while studying, including organisational technology, organisational change, and publicity. Kerryn is interested in the core methods of communication, and would enjoy a career with an emphasis on written communication and oral presentation.

POLLY RAWLINGS is a final year student at QUT, majoring in Organisational Communication, with a minor in Public Relations. While studying, Polly has worked in customer service at the Myer Centre, and has linked her study with work by developing a customer service training plan for the centre. Polly's other university projects have focussed on communication technology and publicity. In 1997, Polly intends to undertake post-graduate study in Arts and Entertainment Management.

EMILY STENDRUP is presently completing a Bachelor of Business with a major in Organisational Communication and a minor in Marketing. As well as being involved in the Student Focus project, Emily has taken part in two industry-based project groups. The first involved undertaking a detailed analysis of the communication technology used at a Brisbane golf club, and the second involved examining and analysing the management structure of the State Emergency Services. All three projects have given Emily valuable experience and have consolidated her communication skills.

ALEXANDER WHITE will complete a Bachelor of Business in Organisational Communication with minors in Management and Human Resource Management at the end of 1996. As part of his degree he has completed one hands-on project analysing the use of communication technology in organisations, and another project examining the effectiveness of one organisation's internal communication. Alex would like 7to pursue a career in Management.

HAYDN WYPYCH is completing a Business degree in Organisational Communication at QUT, with minors in Public Relations and Human Resource Management. Haydn is interested in communication technology, and has completed projects in that field as well as in managerial communication relationships and publicity. Haydn is interested in a career which applies technology to organisations and gives him the opportunity to write and present speeches.

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